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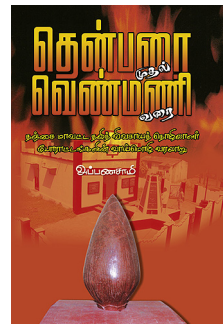


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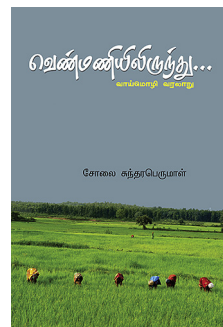
Speaking Up: Voices from Agrarian Struggles in Thanjavur

Parvathi Menon*

Appannasamy (2007), *Thenparayilirunthu Venmani Varai: Thanjai Mavatta Dalit Vivasaya Thozhilalar Porattangalin Vaymozhi Varalaru* (From Thenparai to Venmani: An Oral History of the Struggles of Dalit Agricultural Workers in Thanjavur District), Bharathi Puthakalayam, Chennai.



Sundaraperumal, Solai (2013), *Venmaniyilirunthu: Vaymozhi Varalaru* (From Venmani Onwards: An Oral History), Bharathi Puthakalayam, Chennai.



In an interview given when he was well into his seventies, Nagamangalam Pakkirisami said: “I was a *pannai adimai* [farm servant] with no rights whatsoever.” His family and others of the Paraiyar caste were bonded slaves for a Mudaliar landlord of Nagamangalam.

In those days, *pannai adimais* could not speak or stand up against the landlord. They were treated like cattle, I can tell you. If a serf opposed the landlord, the landlord would have him tied up and whipped in public view at the threshing floor. Two people – they

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too were from among us – were assigned by the landlord to carry out the punishment of pouring liquid cow dung down the tied man's throat. They too had no rights. They had to obey and to punish as they were told by the landlord's supervisor or agent.

Pakkiriswami's recollections move to the oppressive world of agricultural servitude.

Ploughing started early, at 4 am. Ten of us would be allotted a pair of bullocks each. We had to sleep in the shed with the cattle during the ploughing period. The mosquitos were unbearable and tore at us through the night: we would wrap ourselves in sacks to escape them. We could not go home even if we were ill. The supervisor could punish us if he heard the slightest murmuring from us. The landlord gave him the right to beat us, but to do so without drawing blood [so as not to incapacitate the worker during the crucial ploughing period]. What they decided was the law.

It was to escape this degrading and violent system of human bondage that thousands of bonded labourers like Pakkirisami in the region of East Thanjavur rallied to the Communist Party, which had begun working from the late 1930s to break the pernicious system of agrarian slavery among agricultural workers and peasants.

In the interview published in the first book under review, Pakkirisami says that it was to oppose the brutality of the bondage he had described that the "Communist Party went from village to village mobilising people through the peasants' sangham (organisation)."¹

The two slim books under review, at present available only in Tamil, present an important aspect of the history of the peasant movement in India as seen and experienced by 36 participants in the movement for agrarian change in the districts of what are now Nagapattinam and Thiruvarur (parts of the erstwhile Thanjavur district). The book deals with an important and little studied chapter of history, understudied with respect to our understanding of the systems of land tenure and production that existed in India (and the forms of social relationships they upheld), and with respect to the study of popular revolts and the role of ideas in inspiring people to overthrow rural power structures. It is also – as the history of people's movements often are – a bloodstained chapter of history, one that saw oppressed and unempowered actors rise to perform extraordinary acts of heroism and sacrifice to collectively change the conditions under which they lived and worked. The two books present us the voices of some of these actors.

The struggle against landlordism and untouchability, and for human dignity and material betterment in Thanjavur, was to reach a climactic moment of class conflict almost three decades after the Agricultural Labourers Union (Vyavasaya Thozhilalar Sangham) was established in Thanjavur in 1939. On the night of December 25, 1968, following several weeks of strikes and protests led by the Kisan Sabha for higher wages in the area, the landlords launched a deadly and planned attack on the village

¹ Appannasamy (2007), *From Thenparai to Venmani*, pp. 11–15

of Kilvenmani. They sent their armed henchmen to the village. The henchmen cut off all escape routes and pushed 44 Dalits – mainly women, children, and the elderly who were trying to escape – into a hut that they set on fire, killing all those inside. Those who tried to escape – even a baby thrown out by a desperate mother – were pushed back in. The perpetrators were clearly unafraid of the law, and with reason: not a single conviction was eventually made by the courts in the Kilvenmani massacre.

The testimonies of those interviewed in the three books are in most cases from activists who were involved in the agrarian struggle from the 1940s. A striking feature of these testimonies – many of them from activists (like Pakkirisami) who were once farm servants themselves – is the tendency to skim over personal details, including details of the oppression, degradation, and toil of their early years. Their accounts engage predominantly with the political, and to the period after they joined the Kisan movement, when a larger political consciousness gave new meaning and momentum to their lives. The accounts are unstructured and often disjointed, shifting from one recollection to the other in no particular order or sequence. This does not make their testimonies any less important, and could well have happened because of their advanced age when they were interviewed, or because of the way the questions were framed. In the two books under review, the observations on agrarian relations and production under the particular form of feudal oppression that existed in Thanjavur by those who were its real victims are unfortunately somewhat fragmentary. The political content of the respondents' memories of the agrarian struggle and their own roles in it are, of course, of historic significance. At the same time, for social scientists studying agrarian systems and structures, the accounts provide tantalising insights but not the whole picture. Here is perhaps an opportunity foregone, because these voices are now lost. Of the 36 people interviewed, all but four have died. There is surely a lesson to be learned here on the importance of the comprehensive documentation by means of oral testimony.

G. Veeraiyan, a participant in the Thanjavur peasant struggle, agreed to be interviewed for this article. Once a senior functionary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and a leading figure of the Thanjavur agrarian struggle, he is now retired from active political life and lives with his son and family in Sithadi village near Kudavasal town in Thiruvavur district. A thin wiry man, Veeraiyan does not look his 85 years, and, is interested and alert, and more than willing to speak of his experiences and struggles. Veeraiyan is one of the veterans interviewed in the book under review, and he has also written two books of his own on worker and peasant movements in Tamil Nadu.

Veeraiyan joined the Communist Party and Kisan Sabha in 1949, when he was 17. He was approached by an activist of the Party who had tried to enrol him in the Kisan Sabha at the age of 12. "My family was very loyal to the mirasdar (landlord), and I told him then that I could not join a party that opposed the mirasdar." It was a dangerous period. Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code had been

promulgated in the district, the Kisan Sabha was banned, and the entire district given over to the Malabar Special Police to patrol. The police had issued a Rs 1000 reward for information on the whereabouts of B. Srinivasa Rao and Manali Kandasami, both leaders of the agitation. Veeraiyan initially took the responsibility of selling 20 copies of the paper *Ulagarasiyal* at 2 annas each. While doing so, he would search for and identify those who were interested in politics. While selling newspapers, he thus mobilised people who were sympathisers of the Party.

The ban on the Communist Party was from 1949 to 1952, and was lifted only when elections were announced. Veeraiyan was made Secretary of the Sithadi unit.

In the elections, the Communist Party won both Lok Sabha constituencies in Thanjavur, one under the reserved category and one general, and 10 of the 19 Assembly seats. It was a massive victory for the Left, never to be repeated.

In the 1950s, the struggles of the agricultural workers and tenants continued under the leadership of the Kisan Sabha. In addition to the demands for higher wages for agricultural workers, issues of the peasantry were also raised. Veeraiyan said:

In 1953, in response to the attempt by landlords to evict tenants in Thiruturaipoondi, we held a public meeting attended by 60,000 people. We passed a resolution saying that we would not allow tenants to be evicted, and instructed them to continue to plough their lands.

The two-decade long campaign finally bore fruit. After C. Rajagopalachari took over as the Chief Minister of Madras, the Governor promulgated the Tanjore Tenants and Pannayals Protection Ordinance of 1952, which became an Act the following year. According to Veeraiyan, the Chief Minister left no doubt as to where his real sympathies lay. He undertook a visit to Thanjavur soon after the promulgation of the Act to assure landowners that the new legislation was necessary to rid the district of the spectre of Communism.

The Act was historic and made the system of agrarian servitude illegal. With it the conditions of agrarian labour underwent a sea change. “All *pannai adimai* now became agricultural labourers working for wages,” said Veeraiyan. “Now the struggle spread all over Thanjavur for a rise in agricultural wages and for ownership of homesteads.” The Kisan Sabha won the demand for homesteads. In order to avoid paying higher wages to local workers, landlords began to bring in workers from outside.

“The struggles of the peasants and agricultural workers went on unabated,” said Veeraiyan. “And then in 1968, Venmani happened.”

Gopalakrishnan Naidu was the head of the Paddy Growers Association. On the night of December 25, 1968, his goondas, armed with rifles, went to Venmani and told the village

to take down the red flag. The people refused. “We won’t because it is the red flag that liberated us,” they said. So they pushed 44 people into a hut and burnt it down.

Prior to the event, there were rumours that the landlords were planning to burn down Venmani, rumours credible enough for Meenakshi Sundaram, a Kisan Sabha leader, to write to Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) Chief Minister C. N. Annadurai, whose party had been elected to power the previous year, warning of the diabolic act in the planning, and asking for protection. After the incident, Annadurai claimed that he saw the letter late. Eventually, after a long legal battle, the High Court acquitted all the accused.

The horror of that night is conveyed in the interview given by Kisan Sabha activist R. Gopal, once himself a farm servant. He was 19 when the attack on Venmani took place:

At around nine at night, 100 to 200 people descended on the village from all four directions with burning torches in their hands. Some of them were firing from rifles, others had sickles with which they attacked people. The able-bodied ran away. They pushed 44 people into a hut and set it on fire.²

Gopal went on to become a gram panchayat president.

Did the atrocity dampen the movement? Veeraiyan thinks not. In the 1970s, the Kisan Sabha won some significant demands. The Government led by the DMK promulgated a new land ceiling act, and the demand that surplus land be distributed among the landless met with some success. Three hundred thousand acres of surplus land were distributed to the landless. Veeraiyan contrasts the persistence of untouchability in other districts of Tamil Nadu with its absence in the districts that comprised Thanjavur, once the bastion of agrarian servitude and untouchability, where the sweeping force of the people’s movement had its historic impact.

The inspiration for recording the experiences of the struggle and getting them published came from G. Ramakrishnan.³

The peasant movement in East Thanjavur had all the markings of a classic class struggle . . . In addition it was against untouchability and landlordism, which in Thanjavur were inextricably linked. In every village in that region, you will find a heroic story of struggle against oppression.

An important historical account of the peasant movement in Thanjavur between 1940 and 1952 is Saraswathi Menon’s M. Phil dissertation titled *The Peasant Movement in Thanjavur, 1940 to 1952*. When read with the testimonies of the participants in the books under review, a more layered and contextualised view of this period and its significance emerges. Several important aspects of the movement’s historical and

² Sundaraperumal (2013), *From Venmani Onwards*, pp. 84–90

³ Interview with G. Ramakrishnan, Secretary, Communist Party of India (Marxist), Tamil Nadu State Committee.

political background provide the context to the testimonies offered by the Kisan activists who have been interviewed.

A question that is often raised is whether the Thanjavur peasant struggle in its pre-Independence phase, led as it was by the Communist Party and its Kisan front, carried an explicit anti-colonial signature, particularly given the fact that the period witnessed an upsurge of peasant unrest all over the country. Saraswathi Menon argues that the peasant movement in Thanjavur was very much of a piece with the larger picture of anti-colonial and anti-feudal agrarian struggles launched under the leadership of the All India Kisan Sabha, which by 1939 claimed a membership of 800,000 and a significant presence in all parts of the subcontinent. She writes:

Insofar as it was an expression of the worsening conditions of a vast section of the Indian people, and to the extent that it created a law and order problem for the colonial rulers, it must be seen in the context of the freedom movement in India. It must also be seen against the rising social and economic expectations of a people on the verge of freedom. And finally, it must be assessed in the context of a rapidly transforming social as well as political and economic situation.⁴

Related to this question is that of the role of other political players in Thanjavur at the time, and their approach to imperialism and to the agrarian question, on which the Left had set the agenda by the 1940s.

The Congress Party was by no means a minor force in Thanjavur. Prior to the growth of the Communist-led agrarian movement, the Party had succeeded to some extent in uniting all classes against the British. In 1924, the Party supported the landlords in their refusal to pay the increased revenue demand made by the colonial government, thereby winning the support of a section of the landlord class to their side. The Party supported and participated in the railway strike of 1926 held to protest the Government's decision to move a railway workshop from Nagapattinam to Tiruchirappalli. The Thanjavur unit of the party was active in the Vedaranyam Salt March in 1931, and of course in the 1942 Quit India movement. According to the eminent anthropologist and South Asia scholar Kathleen Gough, at this time the Congress drew its strength from small landlords and the rich peasantry.

When the Congress became the ruling party of India, most of the landlords, big businessmen and rural reactionaries flocked to its side. In Thanjavur, the communist opposition, grown strong during the war, provoked violent assaults by the landlords and businessmen, most of whom now financed the Congress Party and looked to it to protect its rights.⁵

Menon's study substantiates this statement. She points to the "dual role" that characterised the approach of the Congress Party to the agrarian issue. In 1948, for example, while the Congress government in Madras unleashed the Public Security

⁴ Menon (1978), pp. 39–40

⁵ Gough (1981), p. 140.

Act to suppress the Kisan movement in Thanjavur, a report by R. Venkataraman, a young Congress lawyer, prepared a largely sympathetic report on the situation of the peasantry and agricultural workers in Thanjavur. The last few years of the decade of the 1940s saw an intensification of the peasant struggle to such an extent that, during several harvests, the Government had to provide police protection for workers that the mirasdars had brought in from outside the district.

Oral histories are important component parts of modern historical enquiry, especially of agrarian history and people's movements. It is important that those who compile or edit oral histories provide comprehensive introductions that provide both explanatory context and analysis. The two books under review lack such introductions, a shortcoming that should be corrected in future editions.

The oral testimonies of the participants of the Thanjavur peasant movement are a precious legacy. If and when a comprehensive and historically contextualised story of this important period is written, the voices of those who participated in the struggle will surely be of foundational significance.

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